



2021

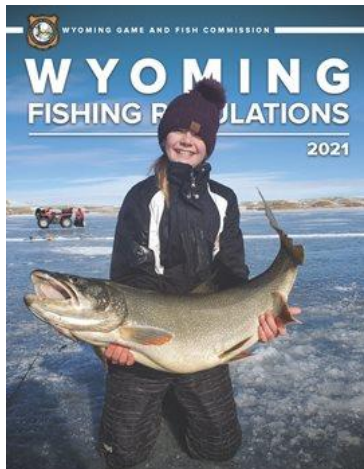
the wyoming game & fish department

# CASPER REGION

## angler newsletter

## Time to Wet Your Line!

### New Regulation Booklet for 2021



Although there were no new changes to fishing regulations between 2019 and 2020, there have been a number of changes to the booklet that may simplify presentation and explanation of existing regulations. If you haven't already done so, please take a look at the new booklet before you begin fishing. Copies of the 2021 regulations are available wherever you get your licenses or you can download a digital copy from our website: <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Fishing-and-Boating/Fishing-Regulations>.

## New Casper Region Fisheries Biologist

### Welcome Nick Hogberg to the Management Crew

Nick Hogberg began his tenure as the new Casper Regional Fisheries Biologist in early January of 2021. Originally from Iowa, Nick earned his Bachelor's Degree from Iowa State University in 2010 before completing his Master's of Science Degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2014. During Graduate school, Nick's Master's research focused on large river fishes and their use of floodplain habitats on the Missouri River. Additionally, Nick conducted research on Channel Catfish in the Red River of Manitoba and large interior river fisheries in Illinois before moving to Wyoming.

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from the central waterways of the North Platte River

Although he is a new addition to the local Management Crew, Nick is actually not new to the Wyoming Game and Fish or Casper, as he had worked on the statewide Aquatic Assessment Crew based out of Casper since 2014. During his time on the Aquatic Assessment Crew, Nick led research projects related to the reestablishment of Shovelnose Sturgeon in the Bighorn River, prairie stream nongame fish research in the eastern plains of Wyoming, and nongame fish conservation projects in the desert streams of southwest Wyoming. When he isn't helping conserve Wyoming's fish populations, Nick enjoys big game hunting, fishing, camping, and spending time with his wife and newborn son.



## New Aquatic Invasive Species Regional Coordinator

### Welcome Wes Gordon to the Casper Region

In August of 2020, the Casper Region of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department welcomed Wes Gordon as the new AIS Regional Specialist. Wes started working for the Department in 2010 as a seasonal fisheries technician while attending college.



Wes graduated from Utah State University with a degree in Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences in 2012. He grew up in Cache Valley, Utah where many outdoor recreational opportunities existed nearby. Wes became interested in aquatic ecosystems early in life and after gaining a strong ecological background from Utah State University, he accepted a job as a technician with the Wyoming AIS program in 2012. In 2013, Wes moved into an AIS supervisory position at the Evanston Port of Entry where he spent two years before transferring to Green River. Wes had been in the role of an AIS Specialist in the Green River region since 2013, until he arrived in Casper last year.

Spending his childhood outdoors camping, hunting and fishing with his family instilled a passion for the conservation and management of water and fisheries resources. When Wes is not inspecting boats or surveying for AIS, you will find him fishing in one of Wyoming's amazing waterways.



# Aquatic Invasive Species Program Update

## Don't Move a Mussel – Conserve a Way of Life

With the boating season upon us here in the Casper region, many folks will start thinking about getting their watercraft ready to get out and enjoy Wyoming waterways. As anglers, sportsmen and watercraft users, we have a responsibility to protect and conserve the resources we enjoy. However, Zebra and Quagga mussels and other Aquatic Invasive Species, threaten our water resources and our way of life.

Zebra and Quagga mussels are freshwater bivalves in the family Dreissenidae and are species of utmost concern in Wyoming. Originating from eastern Europe and western Asia, Dreissenid mussels were first introduced into the Great Lakes in the 1980's by international cargo ships and have rapidly spread across the United States. Dreissenid mussels are the only freshwater mussel that have byssal threads, allowing them to attach and hitchhike on watercraft and other watersports gear. Larval mussels – known as veligers – are microscopic and can survive in standing water for up to 30 days.

Why should we care about Dreissenid mussels? The impacts of an infestation are far reaching and will affect all of us in one way or another. Dreissenid mussels can cause damage to your watercraft by clogging intakes to your motor and other internal systems, in addition to causing biofouling to the outside of your watercraft and other equipment. This results in expensive and time-consuming maintenance. Dreissenid mussels can also impede water delivery systems for both municipal and irrigation water supplies, driving up the costs to consumers. Dreissenid mussels are also deleterious to the ecosystem by filtering out beneficial nutrients. Infestations have been shown to cause a bottom up collapse of the food chain, resulting in the loss of sport and native fisheries. The filtration of nutrients decreases productivity and allows light to penetrate deeper into the water column, causing toxic algae blooms.

Imagine if Seminoe Reservoir were to become infested; what would the consequences be? Many nearby communities rely heavily on the recreational opportunities the North Platte River system provides. Reservoirs along the North Platte River and the river itself are destination fisheries for world class trout and walleye, bringing in millions to local economies. Imagine shorelines and beaches covered with billions of sharp mussel shells and the impact this would have on camping and recreational opportunities. Additionally, it is likely that if Seminoe Reservoir were to become infested with Dreissenid mussels, they would spread downstream causing a severe impact on the entire North Platte River drainage. We can all agree that the best course of action is to prevent an infestation in the first place.



New Zealand Mud Snails (NZMS) were discovered in the North Platte River in 2018 at the Cardwell Access area, below Alcova Dam, and at the Gray Reef Access Area. To date, NZMS have been documented downstream as far north as Speas Rearing Station in the North Platte River. It is likely that NZMS were transported to the North Platte River by an unclean drift boat or on waders by anglers coming from previously infested water in Wyoming such as the Big Horn River. Aquatic invasive species aren't limited to animals though, as some plants also pose a great threat to Wyoming's waters. Curly Pondweed (CPW), for example, is well established in the North Platte River at the Miracle Mile and has slowly moved downstream in Pathfinder Reservoir as far north as Goose bay. To date, no CPW has been discovered below Pathfinder Dam and annual monitoring will be conducted to track the spread.

Watercraft are considered the largest vector of spread of Dreissenid mussels. Whether mussels are attached to the outside of the watercraft or stowed away inside internal compartments, such as ballast tanks, bilge compartments, live-wells or sea strainers, the spread of invasive mussels and other AIS is preventable by taking the time to **Clean, Drain, and Dry** your watercraft and equipment. Please remember to clean and remove any visible vegetation and debris from your watercraft, waders, and other equipment immediately after use. Also, remove bilge plugs and open water barriers before leaving a waterway and during transport to ensure that any unseen water drains. If you have a ballast system, be sure to check your sea strainers as well. We recommend you leave the sea strainers out during transport to aid in drying the ballast system.

Wyoming's AIS regulations state that any watercraft being trailered into the state between March 1 and December 30 must undergo a mandatory inspection before launching on any waterway. This requirement is extended year-round if your watercraft was last used on an infested or suspect water. Additionally, bilge plugs and all water barriers are required to remain out and open during transport. Wyoming is one of the few remaining states without any Zebra or Quagga mussels present and it is important to stay vigilant by remembering to **CLEAN** all equipment after every use, **DRAIN** any standing water from any and all water holding compartments, and allow to thoroughly **DRY** before using again. Performing these three simple tasks and seeking out a watercraft inspection or decontamination when required will help ensure that the wealth of enjoyment we all get from Wyoming's waters will continue to thrive for many generations to come. In doing so, we as anglers, sportsmen, and watercraft users are doing our part to lead by example and preserve our way of life.

For questions, concerns, or to report an AIS sighting, please contact the Casper Regional office at 307-473-3400.



# CLEANDRAINDRY

## WYOMING

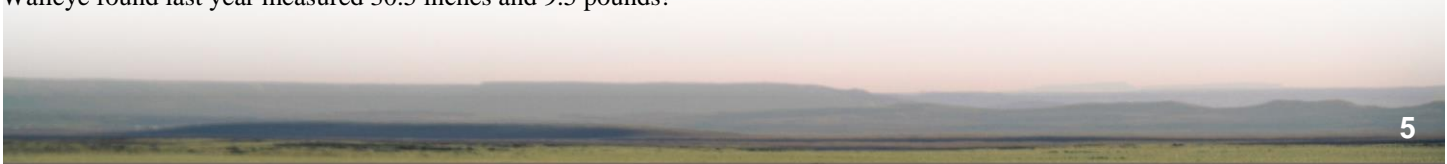
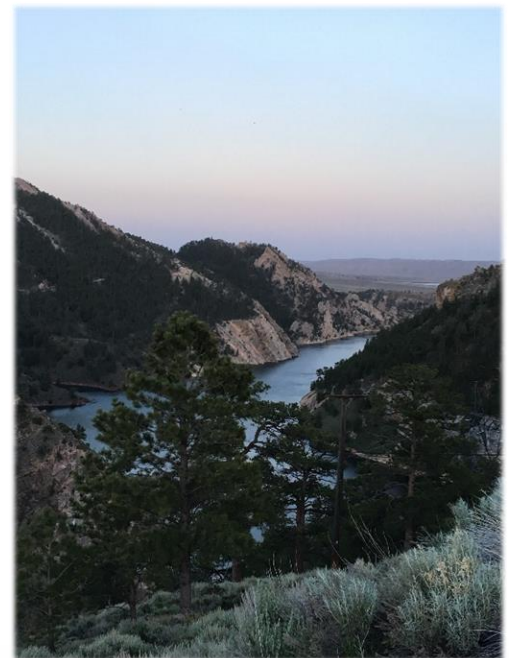


# Regional Fisheries Updates

## Seminole Reservoir

With water levels at Seminole Reservoir having dropped over 21 feet compared to the past couple of years, adventurous anglers will get to experience newly exposed shoreline scenery, fresh fishing spots, and an increased density of fish in 2021. Though trout numbers found in last year's netting data remain lower than we would like, anglers are still poised to find high-quality Rainbow Trout fishing since the population has held relatively stable. Similar to the past few years, high numbers of one-year-old stocked Rainbow Trout and the persistence older age-classes of fish should continue to provide anglers with opportunities to catch larger individuals. More specifically, Rainbow Trout sampled during the spring netting in 2020 averaged 16.0 inches and 1.8 pounds, with one rainbow topping out at 22.5 inches and 3.9 pounds. A few lucky anglers may also chance into some very nice Colorado River Cutthroat Trout, which were found in our netting last spring despite being stocked at relatively low numbers the year before. In addition to stocked Rainbow and Cutthroat Trout, Seminole Reservoir continues to support plenty of wild Brown Trout that migrate down from the upper reaches of the North Platte River. Although they might not be found as readily, Brown Trout typically outgrow other trout species in Seminole Reservoir with the largest fish sampled in the spring of 2020 having measured 25.6 inches and 6.5 pounds!

Despite slight fluctuations between annual catch rates – with 2020 being the highest observed in decades – it is safe to say that the overall size of the Walleye population in Seminole Reservoir has continued to hold relatively stable since 2014. As has been the case for the past three years, however, the appearance of stability in the overall number of fish does not imply stability in the age or size structure of the population. More specifically, sampling conducted last fall revealed a Walleye population that, for the third consecutive year, is increasingly comprised of younger fish (under 16.5 inches) and a decreased catch of memorable fish (i.e., 20 – 25 inchers). To put this more pragmatically, increased numbers of younger fish from successful spawning events are approximately equal to the reductions in the number of older and larger fish. This type of strong recruitment of juvenile Walleye year-after-year has been fairly uncommon in Seminole Reservoir over the years, where good spawning and survival typically occur once every 2 to 4 years. This is likely the result of annual stability of high water levels enjoyed since 2016. With this near steady influx of small fish each year, the average length of Walleye sampled in 2020 has remained fairly low at around 13 inches. Moreover, extremely slow growth rates in Seminole Reservoir has resulted in a “stockpiling” of smaller fish that most Walleye anglers will have noticed by increased catch rates of sub-15 inch fish. Luckily, if historical patterns hold true, numbers of mid-sized to large Walleye should rebound in upcoming years once our current population of small fish grow to a size where they can diversify their diets and take advantage of the abundant White Sucker population in this reservoir. Despite high numbers of fish with low average length and slow growth rates, it should be noted that trophy Walleye are still lurking throughout Seminole Reservoir; the largest Walleye found last year measured 30.5 inches and 9.5 pounds!







## Pathfinder Reservoir

Annual standard spring netting took place in Pathfinder Reservoir in late May, 2020. The purpose of spring netting is to monitor trends in the reservoir's trout fishery, primarily comprised of Rainbow Trout, Snake River Cutthroat Trout, and Brown Trout. Catch rates for Rainbow Trout in 2020 were the lowest since before 2010, with only 29 individuals captured. Though few in number, these fish averaged 19.0 inches and 3.1 pounds. The largest Rainbow Trout captured was 23.4 inches and 4.7 pounds. Thirty-two Snake River Cutthroat were captured, averaging 17.2 inches and 2.3 pounds. The largest of the Cutthroat measured 19.0 inches and weighed 3.4 pounds. Finally, 27 Brown Trout were captured, averaging 18.0 inches and 2.3 pounds, with the largest Brown Trout measuring 22.7 inches and weighing 4.6 pounds. Additionally, three Kokanee were captured in the 2020 netting. These were all larger adults that ranged from 18.2–19.2 inches and weighed between 2.8 and 3.3 pounds. It's good to see Kokanee growing and reaching quality size in the reservoir. Kokanee are difficult to sample in our standard gill nets because they tend to stay off shore and in the middle of the water column. The Casper fisheries crew will be refining techniques to better monitor the Kokanee population in the coming years.



The annual fall netting was conducted in late September to monitor trends in the Walleye population. A total of 232 Walleye were captured, and this represents one of the highest Walleye catch rates ever in Pathfinder Reservoir. The Walleye catch was dominated by fish between 10–15 inches, suggesting large year classes of younger fish growing into quality sizes in the years to come. Overall, Walleye averaged 13.3 inches and 1.0 pounds, with the largest fish that was sampled measuring 31.2 inches and 9.6 pounds. Between the size distribution and the high catch rates, the Pathfinder Walleye fishing promises to be hot for years to come!





## Alcova Reservoir

If there is one body of water in the Casper Region that garnered a lot of attention in 2020 it was Alcova Reservoir. Though the Wyoming Game and Fish doesn't track general use throughout the area, experience while working on the reservoir showed an unprecedented number of recreational visitors throughout the year and a surge in spectators during the fall hoping to see shoreline gems uncovered by the 42-foot drawdown in water levels. Hopefully, if you were one of those that spent time fishing at Alcova this past year, you were able to benefit from the strong populations of Walleye, Trout, and Kokanee Salmon. To that point, the annual fall



sampling showed that the number of Walleye in Alcova remained very high in 2020 with an average catch rate that was the second highest observed in over a decade. As was the case with recent years, this thriving Walleye population stems from excellent adult spawning success, high juvenile survival, and low angler harvest. Unfortunately, Walleye in Alcova have proven difficult to catch – likely because much of the reservoir provides suitable habitat in a way that reduces density at any one place – and the number of anglers pursuing them remains fairly low. Anglers that do manage to catch Walleye at Alcova will most likely enjoy the quality of their fish as the average exceeds 15 inches and 1.4 pounds with the largest fish found in 2020 having measured 30.5 inches and 12.6 pounds!

The results are in from a multiyear study to evaluate the stocking performance of Rainbow, Snake River Cutthroat, and Bear River Cutthroat at Alcova Reservoir. In short, Rainbow Trout were best at packing on the pounds despite relatively poor survival, Snake River Cutthroat neither survived or grew very well, and Bear River Cutthroat have demonstrated increased survival and slower growth when compared to the other trout species. While they might not grow as quickly, Bear River Cutthroat are enjoying longer lifespans in the reservoir than Rainbow Trout – at least five years instead of three – and have reached sizes that are sure to please anglers. The largest sampled Bear River Cutthroat actually exceeded that of Rainbow Trout by tipping the scales at 19.8 inches and 2.9 pounds. Fishing for Kokanee Salmon in Alcova Reservoir has continued to increase in popularity and sampling shows that these fish are doing very well. In addition to solid numbers of Kokanee in Alcova, the size of this exciting new species is already averaging 19.2 inches and 2.6 pounds, with the largest fish sampled in the fall of 2020 measuring 21.2 inches and 3.2 pounds!







## North Platte River - Gray Reef to Lusby

In late-September 2020, the Casper Fisheries Management crew conducted the biennial sampling at Gray Reef to generate estimates of trout abundance and biomass. The 2020 electrofishing sampling occurred across three days – instead of the conventional four – in order to get as many recaptures of previously marked fish before the Alcova drawdown pushed the river from 500 cfs to 2000 cfs. And while the number of fish brought to the boat in 2020 was lower than normal because of this, the generated estimates show that the trout population had held relatively stable – in both abundance and biomass – since the last Gray Reef sampling in 2018. More specifically, the trout population is now sitting at 1,550 fish per mile with a collective 3,063 pounds of trout per mile, both of which remain below our preferred management objective levels. It is noteworthy, however, that the current biomass estimate remains more than five-times higher than the 600 pounds per mile benchmark needed to maintain blue-ribbon status. Rainbow Trout in this reach displayed an impressively high average length of 17.3-inches, with some individuals surpassing 26-inches long. The Brown Trout at Gray Reef, which are typically harder to catch, averaged 15.3 inches in the fall of 2020 and a few fish measured just shy of 25-inches

long. And while anglers are certainly enjoying opportunities to catch these large fish, the cause of these increased average lengths, especially in an otherwise stable population, is the maturation of an already aged populace with little in the way of successful juvenile recruitment. Some additional sampling conducted during the summer months – when juvenile trout emerge from their spawning redds – showed that the high-water conditions that were sustained well after the spring flushing flow in 2020 may have helped generate a big year-class of trout. More specifically, juvenile trout numbers found in early-August 2020 along the side-channels and weedy shorelines near Lusby increased by nearly 200% compared to similar counts from recent years, which is certainly good news!







## North Platte River – Sechrist to Bessemer

Biennial sampling of the North Platte was conducted in early-October of 2020 between the Sechrist and Bessemer access areas. In order to track abundance and condition of the various species that live in this section of river, boat-electrofishing sampling was conducted over four days with 1,039 individual trout – and two Grayling - having been captured and marked. Similar to the results from Gray Reef, there has been no measurable decline in estimates of trout abundance or biomass since 2018. Unfortunately, this means that the current population estimate of 1,702 trout per mile remains well below our management objective of 2,700 trout per mile. This decline has been driven by a substantial reduction in the number of Rainbow Trout, which has comprised nearly 91% of the population since 2016, and is most likely being caused by the same poor spawning success that has impacted trout at Gray Reef. Luckily, this means that the same evidence of spawning success farther upstream should help elevate trout numbers at Bessemer in the upcoming years. In the meantime, trout numbers remain relatively low and the current level for pounds of trout per mile continues to be very high; owing to an aged population that is growing more in length and weight than by numbers of fish. Anglers fishing this section of the Platte can reasonably expect the average fish sizes to be around 14.1 inches for Rainbow Trout and 16.1 inches Brown Trout. That said, the high number of older fish found swimming near Sechrist has resulted in a handful of rainbows measuring over 26 inches long!





## Glendo Reservoir

Glendo Reservoir continues to provide high-quality fishing for a diverse array of species and should be on anyone's list this season. Gizzard Shad continue to overwinter in the reservoir and provide high-quality forage for various sportfish. The annual trend netting took place in August, 2020, and Walleye catch rates were as high as they've been in at least the last 10 years. The Walleye catch was dominated by fish between 12–14 inches and these will likely surpass the minimum size limit and provide great opportunity for anglers to harvest in the coming year. Overall, the average Walleye measured 13.8 inches and weighed 0.9 pounds, and the largest Walleye captured was 26.9 inches and 5.9 pounds. Glendo continues to provide one of the most robust Walleye fisheries in the state. Make time to get there this year!

For years, the panfish fishery in Glendo paled in comparison to the booming Walleye opportunity. The blip in that pattern has been the 2015 year class of Crappie (White and Black) that has survived and continued to grow larger each year. This continued into 2020, as the average size of Crappie captured in the standard netting was 11.6 inches for Black Crappie and 12.0 inches for White Crappie. Many anglers caught Crappies larger than 13 inches in 2020, and Glendo Crappie were one of the most common Master Angler entries in 2020. Unfortunately, these fish are becoming less common in our netting as they age out of the population and are not being replaced through natural recruitment. White Crappie were stocked into Glendo in 2019 and 2020 to try establishing another year class. Hopefully, we will see these fish in sampling gear and angler creels in the years to come.

The final major component to the sport fishery in Glendo Reservoir is the Channel Catfish population. We captured Channel Catfish up to 27 inches and 6.4 pounds during the reservoir netting in 2020. Additionally, we captured a behemoth Catfish while sampling for Gizzard Shad early in the spring that not only eclipsed the abilities of our scale but exceeded the total length of our largest measuring board!

Lastly, the Sauger reintroduction to the North Platte River upstream of Glendo Reservoir continues. Sauger are a close relative of Walleye, and are native to the North Platte River.





The reintroduction began in 2017, when over 160,000 juvenile Sauger were stocked into the river downstream of the Dave Johnston Power Plant near Glenrock. Additional stockings have taken place each year since 2017. Recently, anglers and the WGFD have been capturing Sauger up to 17 inches in the river and Glendo Reservoir. The Casper fisheries management crew has initiated a project to better understand how these fish migrate between the reservoir and river. In 2021, additional sampling to find Sauger at different times of the year will be conducted, and a radio telemetry study will begin in 2022. This project will allow us to further our understanding of Sauger movement in the system and assess their ability to navigate possible passage barriers.

## Help Us Improve Catch and Release Practices

### Give that released trophy a fighting chance!

There is no question that catch and release angling has become more prevalent amongst the local fishing community in recent years. This shift away from consumptive harvest is particularly widespread amongst tournament anglers and fly fisherman. And while catch and release angling can be a great conservation strategy – especially in heavily pressured waters or areas with low fish populations – the act of releasing a fish does not necessarily ensure that it will live... or that it will live well. In most cases, the ability of a fish to survive and thrive after having been released will come down to just a few basic decisions anglers make before, during, and after landing a fish. More specifically, the focus for anglers interested in proper catch and release practices should be on when and where you are fishing, what kind of tackle you are using, as well as how you will land, handle, document, and release your prized catch. Below are some tips from the Casper Fisheries Crew to consider next time you hit the water for some catch-and-release fishing!

#### *Stay cool*

- Avoid fishing in locations, times of year, or times of day with high water temperatures. Namely, when water temperatures are 70°F or above, it may be best to consider traveling to higher elevations with colder water, harvesting what you catch, or getting an early jump on the day to fish during the morning hours when water temperatures are lowest.

#### *Choose the right tackle*

- Use circle hooks, barbless hooks, and hooks with pinched barbs. These types of hooks have been found to reduce immediate damage to fish and can help increase survival by making hook removal easier and faster with less fish handling. If you're a fan of using lures, consider cutting extra points from treble hooks or switching to single point barbless hooks. Also, hook removal is made much faster and less damaging when tools such as forceps or pliers are used. Lastly, for fish caught deep in the throat or gills, it is best to clip the line as close to the hook as possible rather than to trying to remove the hook itself.
- Use fishing line or tippet material that is heavy enough to fight your fish quickly to minimize exhaustion. While it is necessary in some locations to use ultra-light tackle, most waters in the Casper Region are turbid enough to allow for larger diameter fishing line or tippet. Quicker fights will not only minimize the chance of injury, but it will help conserve a fish's energy reserves needed for swimming, foraging, and predator avoidance.



### *Handle with care*

- Avoid items, locations, or conditions that may abrade or remove the slime coating from fish. It is this protective layer of slime that insulates all fish from many of the parasites, bacteria, and fungi that are naturally found in water. As such, anything that disrupts this slime coating creates vulnerability to subsequent infection or infestation. The most common culprits for removing protective slime from fish are dry hands, net bags with knots, gloves, boat decking material, and rocks or sand.
- Do not land your fish by dragging them onto the shoreline or boat decking. Though landing a fish without a net or even a designated netter can be difficult, backing away from the water and “beaching” your catch is extremely injurious to the mouth, skin, and slime coating and will decrease the likelihood of survival and well-being after they swim off.
- Invest in a net with a knotless or rubber mesh net bag. These types of nets are widely available and in most cases the bags themselves are available that can be retrofitted on to your current net. Because of the lack of abrasive knots and the addition of smooth coatings, these types of nets will go a long way in preserving the health and condition of your catch.
- If you need to handle the fish, take a second to remove your gloves and get your hands wet. Though some fish can be unhooked and released directly from the net, some require a bit more attention and handling before they swim off. When this is the case, remember that dry hands and fabric will quickly peel away the protective slime coating that fish need to stay healthy. If you are fishing during the colder months, you may consider planning ahead to bring a towel to dry your hands off after the release and a set of hand warmers to warm up those fingers.
- Hold the fish horizontal with a gentle grip on the tail and body. Few things are more damaging to the mouths and gills of larger fish that to suspend it vertically by the jaw or operculum. Even when held flat to the water, minimize risk of damage by keeping fingers out of the fish’s mouth and gills. When holding a fish, use a thumb and index finger to encircle the caudal area in front of the tail while cradling the pectoral area with the other hand; squeezing too hard with this hand can cause damage to the heart or liver.
- Allow fish to revive and recover before release. Gently hold the fish you plan on releasing in the net with the head pointed upstream in clean flowing water or fully submerged over the side of the boat until the fish can swim off under its own power. Though it is a common practice, pulling the fish back and forth in the water does not speed recover; rather it can injure the gills and decrease their efficiency to extract fresh oxygen from the water.





### *Make memories... not montages*

- Not every fish needs a full photo shoot; there, the secrets out. Believe it or not, in the not-so-distant past, it was the act of having spent the day fishing – regardless of social media notoriety – that served as its own reward. So yes, a picture may be worth a thousand words, and some fish are too big or too nice looking to pass up a photo opportunity, but there are certainly a great many fish that are caught that could be released quickly and without being excessively handled or held out of water for the sake of another picture.
- Keep the fish in the water as much as possible, even while taking pictures. This is especially important if your fish has been over-exerted, mishandled, or fought in warmer water; all of which can decrease a fish's probability of survival after release. The best course of action to document your trophy is to keep the fish submerged in water while you (or a friend) set up the focus and lighting on your camera, then lift the fish only long enough to snap a few quick photos while returning the fish back to the water every few seconds. Not only will this add dramatic flair to your picture with water actively falling off the fish, but it will help keep the gills wet and enable your fish to breath.
- Be creative with your photo compositions. Instead of the conventional “grip-and-grin” style photo, consider leaving your fish mostly submerged and use natural lighting and dynamic composition to capture that trophy while putting the welfare of the fish first.



## Casper Fisheries Management Crew



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